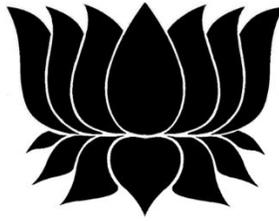




**Om:** Om is both a symbol and a sound in the Sanskrit language. Hindus believe that Om is the first sound made by god, and therefore Om is the root of the universe and everything in it.



**Lotus:** According to Hinduism, within each human is the spirit of the sacred lotus. It represents eternity, purity, divinity, and is widely used as a symbol of life, fertility, reincarnation.

## The Caste System (*Varnas*)

**Definition:** A caste system is class structure that is determined by birth. Loosely, it means that in some societies, if your parents are poor, you're going to be poor, too. Or, if your parents have a certain job, you will have that job as well. Members of a high caste enjoy more wealth and opportunities while members of a low caste perform menial jobs.

**Brahmin:** The highest caste level. In ancient times, the Brahmin would be the priests or spiritual leaders. In modern society, they would correspond to the philosophers, religious leaders, and teachers.

**Kshatriyas:** (pronounced something like "kshot ree yahs") The second highest level of the caste system. In ancient times, members of this caste would be nobles or warriors. In modern society, they are the politicians, police, and the military.

**Vaisyas:** (pronounced something like "vy sy us") The third highest level of the caste system. In ancient times, members of this caste would be craftsmen, artisans, and farmers. In modern society, they are the merchants.

**Shudras:** (pronounced something like "shoo drrahs") The lowest level of the caste system. In ancient times, the members of this caste would be the unskilled laborers or laboring class. In modern times, little has change about this caste and they remain menial workers or hard laborers.

**Dalit:** Known as "untouchables", members of this group are not considered a part of the caste system. Members of this group are outcast by Hindu society. Members of this caste also perform jobs that are otherwise considered unclean or undesirable such as sweeping streets, cleaning latrines, and disposing of the bodies of dead animals. These jobs require them to be in contact with bodily fluids. They are therefore considered polluted and not to be touched.

## Origins of the Caste System:

Reincarnation is one of the basic beliefs in Hinduism; after each life, a soul is reborn into a new material form. A particular soul's new form depends upon the virtuousness of its previous behavior. Thus, a truly virtuous person from the Shudra caste could be rewarded with rebirth as a Brahmin in his or her next life. Souls can move not only among different levels of human society, but also into other animals - hence the vegetarianism of many Hindus. Early written evidence about the caste system appears in the Vedas, Sanskrit texts from as early as 1500 BCE, which form the basis of Hindu scripture. The importance of purity in the body and food is found in the Vedas, which explains the why the Dalit are considered to be "unclean" and are outcast from Hindu society.

## Changing one's Caste:

A Hindu can change which caste they are born into by having good "Karma" in life. Part of having good Karma is following the Dharma (the moral law of the universe). The laws of Dharma are listed below:

- Forgiveness
- Piety or self-control
- Honesty
- Sanctity
- Control of senses
- Reason
- Knowledge or learning
- Truthfulness
- Absence of anger
- Patience